

America's Southern Front: Immigration, Homeland Security, and the Border Fencing Debate

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Introduction

They call themselves the “Minutemen,” named after the famed volunteer militia in the American colonies that started an armed rebellion against British rule two centuries ago, resulting in America’s independence. But the mission of today’s Minutemen is not to liberate occupied territory from colonial rule, or plant the seeds of democracy across new frontiers—but rather to prevent the flow of illegal immigrants across the U.S.-Mexican frontier, many of whom are pursuing the very same dream of America that inspired the original Minuteman.

Like their namesake, however, they are a group of civilian volunteers, a contemporary militia that has pledged to defend the U.S. border from foreign infiltration, a task they believe the U.S. government has not fulfilled.

The Politics of Homeland Security

Today’s Minutemen—whose full name is the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps—were among the very first Americans to organize politically around the issue of America’s porous southern border, and their perception that it was not sufficiently defended to ensure America’s homeland security.

They’ve persistently drawn attention to the free-flow of illegal aliens from the Mexican side of the frontier, and have deployed legions of volunteers to the southwestern frontier region to monitor the border, and bear witness to the flow of undocumented workers into America. And, more recently, they have offered to begin construction of a private security fence in the face of the federal government’s inaction. In short, they’ve sought to politicize the issue of U.S. homeland security in an effort to persuade the federal government to take action, and to reduce the flow of illegal immigrants into the United States.

Initially brushed off by political elites as little more than a fringe group seeking vigilante justice, and portrayed as far outside the mainstream of public opinion, their persistence on this issue—and growing public alarm over America’s long and under-secured border with Mexico during the continuing global war on terror—has propelled these new Minutemen onto the front pages of

newspapers and onto the most prominent talk shows, as their issue has unexpectedly soared to the top of the American political agenda.

Adding fuel to the political fire, America's huge population of Hispanic immigrants—with some 11 to 12 million illegals, and many more times that number of legal residents from across the Rio Grande—have recognized a unique political opportunity to assert their will, and instead of quietly laying low in fear of deportation, millions have taken to the streets in dozens of U.S. cities this spring, aligning with labor unions, the Roman Catholic Church, and politicians on the left, resulting in America's largest and most enduring mass protests since the Vietnam War. The most recent mass protest—held on May Day—brought over one million immigrants and their supporters into the streets, with an estimated 400,000 attending rallies in Los Angeles and 400,000 more in Chicago, according to police estimates, closing factories, emptying schools, and briefly shutting down much of the American economy that depends upon cheap labor for their continued profitability.



*Day Without Immigrants protest drew over one million protesters nationwide on May 1, 2006—
Morry Gash, AP photo*

Minutemen to the Rescue

The Minutemen represent the conservative side of the immigration-related political discourse now playing out along the border and throughout the cities and towns populated by millions of illegals across America, and they have articulated a clear and simple solution to America's security dilemma along its southern frontier: fencing it off by building a security fence much like the Israelis have done to stop the flow of terrorists from the West Bank into Israel proper, and shutting down the virtual free-flow of illegal immigrants seeking a better life at the bottom rung of America's upwardly mobile economic system.

As reported by *Associated Press* reporter Arthur H. Rotstein, "If the government doesn't build security fencing along the Mexico border, Minuteman border watch leader Chris Simcox says he and his supporters will." To that end, he has sent "an ultimatum to President Bush to deploy military reserves to the Arizona border by May 25 or his supporters will break ground for their own building project." Simcox explains his group intends on showing Washington "how easy it is to build these security fences, how inexpensively they can be built when built by private people and free enterprise."^[1]

While the Minutemen are outspoken in their criticism of the government and its failure to protect America's southern border, their concern with security along the U.S. southern frontier has rapidly blossomed into a mainstream issue—a weak flank in the war on terror that leaves much of America vulnerable to terrorist attack. Rotstein reports how the U.S. Congress “has been debating immigration reform for several months,” with one bill approved in the House of Representatives this past December that “calls for nearly 700 miles of fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border.” The bill, HR-4437, proposes to erect a fence along much of the U.S./Mexico border, and to declare illegal immigrants as felons, subject to arrest and deportation.

The idea of fencing off the U.S.-Mexican border has proven unpopular in Mexico, where remittances from Mexicans working in America sustain millions of Mexican families, so much so that Mexican President Vicente Fox has attacked the idea as “shameful.” But the Minutemen remain undaunted, and appear to be gaining support on the ground. Simcox claims that “a half-dozen landowners along the Arizona-Mexico border have said they will allow fencing to be placed on their borderlands, and others in California, Texas and New Mexico have agreed to do so as well,” while “surveyors and contractors have offered to help with the design and survey work,” as well as to “provide heavy equipment for his Minuteman Civil Defense Corps to build fencing.”

On April 19th, Simcox spoke with Alan Colmes—co-host of the *Fox News* Hannity & Colmes show. Simcox explained his group is “going to give the president an ultimatum to declare a state of emergency and deploy the National Guard and military reserves or by the 25th of May or Memorial Day weekend, we’re going to break ground and we’re going to start helping landowners to build a double layer security fence along their properties, because the federal government refuses to protect them.” He acknowledged that the Minutemen’s efforts “would certainly be piecemeal, because the federal government, of course, has bought up a lot of the land along the border, as well as the state governments have bought land.” But despite the piecemeal nature of their fence building effort, Simcox explained that “it’s symbolic of the frustration of Americans. Americans need to help other Americans along the border.”^[2] The Minutemen have identified what has become a hot-button issue, and have moved forward to secure America’s border through voluntarism, and some might argue, vigilantism. But their energized efforts and headline-generating moves are no longer those of a fringe movement cut off from the mainstream, but are now reflective of a broader movement to secure America’s southern flank.

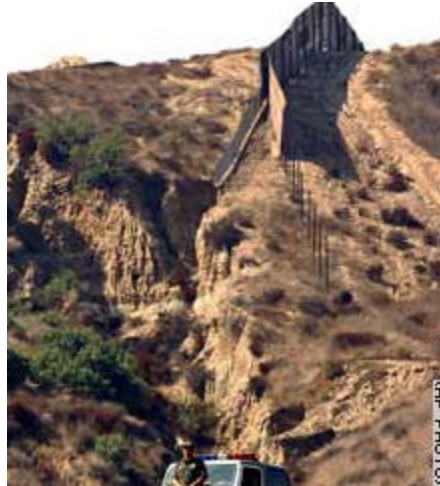
Momentum Builds for a Fence

As reported by reporter Mimi Hall in *USA Today*^[3], the “once-radical idea to build a 2,000-mile steel-and-wire fence on the U.S.-Mexican border is gaining momentum amid warnings that terrorists can easily sneak into the country.” Indeed, in the U.S. Congress, “a powerful Republican lawmaker... proposed building such a fence across the entire border and two dozen other lawmakers signed on,” and “via the Internet, a group called WeNeedaFence.com has raised enough money to air TV ads warning that the border is open to terrorists.” Hall notes that even at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which opposes building a fence along the entire border with Mexico, DHS secretary Michael Chertoff has “waived environmental laws so that construction can continue on a 14-mile section of fence near San Diego that has helped border agents stem the flow of illegal migrants and drug runners” there. Like the Minutemen, the U.S. government is starting to warm up to the idea of a security fence, at least as a piecemeal solution to a problem quickly dominating the political agenda.

As explained to Hall by Republican congressman Duncan Hunter of California, who serves as chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and who has proposed building a longer fence all the way from San Diego, California to Brownsville, Texas, “You have to be able to enforce your borders. It’s no longer just an immigration issue. It’s now a national security issue.” But Hall explains that fencing the border remains controversial, and notes that the Bush administration believes “a Berlin Wall-style barrier would be a huge waste of money—costing up to \$8 billion.” She notes that Border Patrol Chief David Aguilar believes “it makes more sense to

use a mix of additional agents, better surveillance, and tougher enforcement of immigration laws—and fences.”

Advocates of a border fence to secure America’s southern frontier, like Representative Hunter, argue that San Diego’s experience is proof positive that a fence can work, noting “the number of illegal migrants arrested is one-sixth of what it was before the fence was built.” Reminiscent of the Israelis, whose security fence along the West Bank was widely criticized the world over while at the same time drastically reducing the external security threat, Hunter explains that “people have made stupid editorial comments about the Great Wall of China,” noting that “the only thing that has worked is that fence.”



Mexico-California border fence—AP photo

Shutting Down America

With the right calling for the construction of a security fence, and for the deportation of America’s millions of undocumented workers, many more left-leaning, pro-immigrant organizations—including the labor unions, civic organizations and many Church groups—have been calling instead for amnesty for America’s illegals, and for maintaining an open border. In recent months, a coalition of these organizations has emerged, generating of a mass-movement that has spread across America, resulting in some of the nation’s largest demonstrations since the Vietnam era. This week’s protests, held across the country on May 1st, saw over one million immigrants participate in the nationwide “Day Without Immigrants.”

As reported by *Reuters* correspondent Dan Whitcomb on April 27th, pro-immigration activists expected the nationwide protests planned for May 1 would “flood America’s streets with millions of Latinos to demand amnesty for illegal immigrants and shake the ground under Congress as it debates reform,” and that “such a massive turnout could make for the largest protests since the civil rights era of the 1960s.”^[4]

As Whitcomb reported, organizers of the rallies expected that “America’s major cities will grind to a halt and its economy will stagger as Latinos walk off their jobs and skip school.” Jorge Rodriguez, a union official who has helped to organize the massive rallies last month, predicted there would be “2 to 3 million people hitting the streets in Los Angeles alone,” adding “we’re going to close down Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Tucson, Phoenix, Fresno.”



Protesters waved both the U.S. and Mexican flags at the Liberty Memorial Museum during Monday's immigrant rights rally in Kansas City—David Pulliam, Kansas City Star photo

But while several hundred thousand protesters took to the streets in both Los Angeles and Chicago, the overall total of participants was closer to one million, well below predictions. Whitcomb explained that “not all Latinos were comfortable with such militancy, fearing a backlash in Middle America,” and this may have contributed to the lower than expected numbers on May 1st. As well, in the days leading up to the “Day Without Immigrants,” rumors of government sweeps and a crackdown on undocumented workers in some southern cities quickly created a climate of fear, driving many of the illegals who just weeks ago took to the streets underground, in fear of deportation.

The immigration issue has proven to be politically divisive—and as Whitcomb explains, “immigration has split Congress, the Republican Party and public opinion.” On one side of the debate, conservative groups like the Minutemen “want the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants returned to Mexico and a fence built along the border,” while those closer to the middle on this issue, “including President George W. Bush, want a guest-worker program and a path to citizenship.” On the other side of the political spectrum, progressives “want full amnesty, full legalization for anybody who is here,” and as union official Rodriguez explains, “that is the message that is going to be played out across the country on May 1.” It’s no surprise the national day of action was scheduled for May Day, as this is the traditional day “when workers around the world often march for improved conditions.”

Potential for a Backlash

But opponents of the demonstrations, such as one of the Minutemen founders, Jim Gilchrist, who believes that “it’s intimidation when a million people march down main streets in our major cities under the Mexican flag.” Consequently, he predicts that “this will backfire.” Indeed, as reported by *Boston Globe* staff writer Yvonne Abraham on April 28th, “across the country, hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their supporters are planning to stay away from work and school, avoid spending money, wear white, and join rallies and prayer vigils,” but “despite that excitement, the plan has touched off an intense debate about whether the protest will backfire at a sensitive time in the immigration debate,” and “some immigrant activists worry that it may undermine a hard-won image of immigrants as tireless workers who come to America seeking only jobs and better lives.” Some labor unions, such as the AFL-CIO and the SEIU, are even “discouraging their members from staying home from work, saying such work stoppages are justified only over contractual issues.”^[5]

In some communities, the days leading up to the protests sparked widespread anxiety throughout the immigrant community, as rumors of immigration raids and widespread arrests have driven

many immigrants off the streets in fear. As reported by Alfonso Chardy in *The Miami Herald* on April 27th, the so-called “Day Without Immigrants” planned for May 1st had “arrived early throughout South Florida, fueled by widespread talk on Spanish-language and Haitian-Creole radio shows of mass immigration arrests,” and as a result “the festive atmosphere organizers hoped would prevail in the run-up to Monday’s rallies has suddenly turned somber as immigrants believe they are being targeted everywhere and anywhere by immigration agents.” Indeed, “the climate reached such extraordinary proportions that it prompted the Mexican consul in Miami—Jorge Lomonaco—to call *The Miami Herald* Thursday and say that the situation has given rise to ‘concerns by the Mexican government,’” and that “that fears of raids had sparked confusion and a flood of calls to the consulate about sweeps and operations that his staff had yet to verify.” However, while “U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has acknowledged targeted operations in which wanted foreign criminal convicts or deportation absconders have been detained,” Chardy reports the agency “has denied random raids.” But nonetheless, “fear was pervasive in immigrant communities from Homestead to Little Havana to Pompano Beach to Lake Worth,” and “Homestead’s streets were deserted, and many stores, nurseries and constructions sites in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach were missing workers and customers as many undocumented migrants stayed home for the fourth consecutive day fearing they will be swept up and deported.” Chardy believes these recent rumors have “helped to create an atmosphere of alarm in immigrant communities that almost certainly will have an impact on Monday’s planned events,” and notes “some organizers thought alarm would drive undocumented workers further underground, pre-empting participation in rallies and marches.”^[6]

But as America prepared for the May 1st demonstrations, many businesses that depended on Hispanic workers prepared to remain idle. As reported by *Reuters*, Cargill Meat Solutions, the second largest beef producer and third largest pork producer in the U.S., has said “five of its U.S. beef plants and two hog plants will be closed this coming Monday due to the immigration rallies scheduled for that day.”^[7] A company spokesman explained that “we talked with employees and many wanted to participate in the May 1 activities. Because we share the concerns of many employees about HR-4437, we felt it was appropriate to change the schedules.” Earlier mass protests held on April 10th reduced U.S. meat production due to the absence of thousands of workers. *Reuters* reports how the U.S. meat industry, “which relies heavily on immigrant labor, has been advocating immigration reform to ensure a legal and stable work force.” The geographical reach of the meat industry suggests the issue is not just confined to the southwest states along the Mexican frontier, and the Cargill plants closing down are located from Texas all the way across the Midwest to Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Iowa, and Illinois.

While over one million participants took to the streets on May 1, this was far below the several million participants predicted by protest organizers. As noted in a May 4 op/ed in *The Monitor*, an online newspaper serving the Rio Grande Valley of Texas:

“If Monday’s rally was meant to bring the U.S. economy to its knees, it failed. Some companies and stores shut down, pre-emptively or perhaps even enthusiastically, since these businesses also have an interest in maintaining a reliable flow of cheap foreign labor. But major disruptions were lacking. The Los Angeles Economic Development Corp. estimated the impact at \$200 million in Los Angeles County. But that’s not significant in a county that generates \$1.2 billion in economic activity daily.”^[8]

Political Complexity

With such large business enterprises finding their interests aligned with the aspirations of America’s millions of illegal workers, it’s no surprise to see the political debate over the U.S.-Mexican frontier and the fates of the illegals becoming a complicated affair, causing fissures within both the Republican and Democratic parties. This complexity is reflected in an article authored by David Lightman, the Washington Bureau Chief of the *Hartford Courant*, from the Northeastern and traditionally Democratic state of Connecticut. He reports how members of

Congress recently returned to the nation's capital after two weeks of recess back home, during which they had an opportunity to hear from their constituents "about what has become Washington's most pressing issue: illegal immigration." Lightman explains "what members have heard... is a 'mixed bag of remedies.'" [9] Lightman observes that the U.S. Senate had "thought it had a compromise April 6 that would have toughened border enforcement while making it easier for the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants now in this country to gain citizenship," but "that plan fell apart because of parliamentary bickering." Democrats are criticizing Republicans and the President for supporting "a plan that would criminalize immigrants, families, doctors and even churches just for giving Communion," while Republicans are fighting back against the Democrats for rejecting the Republican plan that envisioned a path to legal status for current illegals in America.

Aiming for the Middle Ground

Lightman points out that despite the partisan bickering in Washington, across America, "first and foremost, people want the border shut," and as explained by Connecticut Republican Congressman Rob Simmons, the people want "sensors, monitors, surveillance cameras, even a virtual fence: People want that done." But according to Lightman, "few observers expect the 700-mile fence or the stringent penalties for illegal workers and their employers to survive" the next round of congressional compromise. He notes that Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and House Speaker Dennis Hastert issued a joint statement "saying they intended to produce legislation 'that will not make unlawful presence in the United States a felony,'" and that Republican Senator and potential presidential candidate John McCain, "an architect of the compromise plan, says colleagues have three choices: 'the status quo, or send 'em all back, both of which are impractical,' or the kind of compromise that would allow guest workers to ease their way into this country," as has been envisioned by both President Bush and Senate Majority Leader Frist. Lightman finds that politicians of all stripes appear to "agree on broad themes: secure the border, enforce immigration laws, and create a path to legal immigration."

In the state of California—a predominantly Democratic state with a large population of illegal immigrants—its decreasingly popular Republican governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, has tried to find some middle ground. Schwarzenegger, himself an immigrant that eloquently speaks of the dream of America, has recently questioned the appropriateness of a security fence along the border with Mexico. He believes that a border fence with Mexico is both obsolete and economically disadvantageous to his state—as well as a potential political liability to the governing Republican Party in this traditionally democratic state. Indeed, Governor Schwarzenegger "has come out strongly against tough immigration proposals... including the construction of a fence along the border with Mexico—an idea he called 'going back to the Stone Ages'." [10] The Governor told *ABC Television* that since "we are landing men on the moon and in outer space using all these great things," that he believes "other technology really can secure the borders" in a more effective manner than by building an old-fashioned wall. As he explained, "If I say now, 'Yes, let's build the wall,' what would prevent you from building a tunnel? How many tunnels have been built in these last 10 years?" He added "I mean, we've detected tunnels left and right that people can drive trucks through."

Trying to maintain the middle ground on this divisive issue, Governor Schwarzenegger continues to oppose amnesty for America's 11-12 million illegal immigrants—one of the demands being articulated by the huge crowds at recent demonstrations across the nation. But in contrast to those further to the right such as the Minutemen, he also has "lambasted calls for their immediate deportation"—citing the economic costs of such a large-scale deportation: "It would cost 500 billion dollars. Who's going to pay for that?" Schwarzenegger, himself an immigrant, walks a unique tightrope on this issue. *Associated Press* reporter Michael R. Blood has observed the Governor's tightrope walk, noting how last year, the Governor "backed a federal plan to build a stretch of border fence between San Diego and Tijuana," and then this year has changed course, saying that "walling off hundreds of miles of the California-Mexico border is a strategy from the

Stone Age.” Blood cites one political observer who explains “the governor’s ‘schizophrenic view’ mirrors divisions among voters and within Schwarzenegger’s own party,” compounded by the increasing importance of the immigration issue on the political agenda. As Blood reports, a California statewide survey recently “ranked immigration as the most important issue in the state, overshadowing even education.”^[11]

Voting with their Feet

Christian Science Monitor staff writer Danna Harman reports how as the political debate inside the U.S. “continues over immigration reform policy,” down on the southern side of the border, “there seems to be consensus that enforcement measures will deter almost no one.”^[12] Can a fence stop the flow? Harman reports that “proponents of a fence argue that these preventative measures can be effective, and point to the San Diego sector as proof,” where “after the creation of a fence and a beefing up of enforcement around the point of entry in the early 1990s,” that region “saw the number of attempted crossings plummet.”

But Harman explains that “such measures only serve to push the human traffic elsewhere,” just as Governor Schwarzenegger has suggested in his recent comments on the proliferation of illicit cross-border tunnels. So even though Operation Gatekeeper in California “did drastically cut down the number of illegal immigrants trying to cross near San Diego,” Harman points out that “this only sent people to Texas.” Then, “beefed up patrols along the Texas border soon pushed the traffic away from El Paso and toward Nogales and Yuma”—so “today, close to half of all illegal crossings take place in Arizona.” And, Harman notes, “with increased vigilance near entry points and urban areas in this state, illegal immigrants try crossing in more difficult terrain—in locations where temperatures during the summer months often rise into the hundreds and never drop,” and as a result, “a record 473 migrants died in 2005 while crossing the US-Mexico border, the most since the Border Patrol began tracking such deaths in 1999.” Harman notes that “the border patrol caught 1.2 million would-be illegal immigrants in 2005; that’s an average of one arrest every 30 seconds.” Indeed, the dream of America, and its economic promise, continues to inspire millions of people to join the continuing exodus to the North. As Harman describes:

“They stream in. Today, the same as yesterday. The same as the day before. Backpacks are stuffed with bottled water, soap, chips, maybe an icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe. They wear sweaters and wool hats for the cold desert nights... travelers arrive from all over Mexico, Central America, even as far away as Colombia, and Brazil. They are going to ‘El Norte.’ They tell you that, straight out. And if they don’t cross this time, they will simply try again.”

With so many undocumented workers heading north year after year, it’s more than likely that technology alone cannot solve a problem with such deep historic and economic roots. But the issue of fencing-off America’s southern frontier has generated widespread political participation from all across the political spectrum, increasing the likelihood that a solution of some sort will be found—as policymakers respond to the groundswell of political opinion, and action, that’s been recently focused on this issue. Now, more than ever before, Americans seem prepared to debate the trade-offs inherent in protecting their southern border while at the same time ensuring the nation’s economic needs for cheap labor are met, heeding the call of the Minutemen as they did long ago.

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